



Internet Dreams for Disadvantaged Children

Thirteen-year-old Boyan lives in the village of Kurtovo Konare, less than 100 miles from the Bulgarian capital of Sofia. The village is small and educational opportunities for a child with muscular dystrophy like Boyan are not many.

Boyan was diagnosed with the disease when he was 6-year-old, and for the past year and a half has been confined to a wheelchair. He has been unable to attend school because it is not wheelchair accessible, and although friends helped the disabled teenager, getting around was a problem.

Boyan's favorite subject is mathematics and his grades are always excellent. Geography and national history rank second, but the boy's dream is to study computer science and to go to high school. Just several months ago this was all but impossible.

In 2003, Boyan joined an individual training program at a Bulgarian Chitalishte which is a local community cultural and educational center. For centuries Chitalishte has been the focal point of Bulgarian tradition and culture, and the heart of the community's life. During the past couple of years, however, the Chitalishte activities were somewhat forgotten as the economic transition made financing scarce.



Photo: Family archive

Boyan is back home with friends after the lessons at the Internet Center.

USAID aims to bring back to life those Bulgarian community centers and build national capacity by strengthening local development and the participation of Bulgarian citizens. USAID is helping Bulgarian community centers in building alliances with the Ministry of Culture, local government, businesses, and nongovernmental organization to revitalize the local community and to generate new opportunities for education and development in small and economically disadvantaged Bulgarian villages. The Chitalishte project is a joint initiative of USAID, UNDP and the Government of the Netherlands.

Three hundred Chitalishte centers throughout Bulgaria are participating in the USAID project. In addition, USAID is fostering information communications technology for development at the centers. Twenty-five of the participating Chitalishte have Internet centers, most of them located in remote and economically disadvantaged regions of the country. USAID funded the renovation of the Chitalishte in Kurtovo Konare which is now accessible to disabled people like Boyan.

"With the help of USAID, the Chitalishte now offers educational opportunities for disabled people like Boyan. In only one year, Boyan received certificates for the successful completion of several computer courses."

- Emilia Shusharova, Chitalishte Center employee.

As a result of USAID's program, 600 children have access to a limited range of activities including computer courses, Internet, e-mail, web development, and distance learning. In 2003, the number of trainees at the centers totaled 2,843 and additional certification was earned by 1,342 Bulgarians. The Project has created 131 jobs - 95 temporary and 36 permanent.

Now Boyan has his chance to achieve his dreams by attending the Internet Center at the local Chitalishte. In only one year, Boyan received certificates for the successful completing of several computer courses.

